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SUBJECT: KUWAIT: CONCERN ABOUT BEING CAUGHT IN U.S.- IRAN  
CROSSFIRE

Classified By: Ambassador Deborah Jones for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary: The war of words over Iran's refusal to suspend its nuclear enrichment activities has sparked considerable concern in Kuwait, which fears the situation could devolve into an actual U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear sites. The nation's media and a number of its parliamentarians have commented extensively in recent weeks on the dangers that tiny and ill-positioned Kuwait faces in the event of such a clash, calling on the GOK to ensure that Kuwait is not used as a base for the launching of any U.S. attacks on Iran and urging the GOK to step up emergency planning measures to protect the population in the event of a conflict. Senior GOK officials have reiterated their concerns in meetings with USG officials. Despite the rhetoric, we see few signs that the Kuwaitis are actively preparing for a disaster and they have not increased the state of readiness of their military. End Summary.

12. (U) In a widely reported August 9 interview on Al-Arabiya News Channel, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Sabah Al-Salem Al Sabah acknowledged Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology but called unequivocally on Iran to meet IAEA controls and safeguards. In his discussion, the FM warned Iran that its "failure to respond positively to international demands will serve neither their interest nor those of their friends in the Gulf region." Continuing, the FM remarked that "Kuwait is against the use of force to settle the dispute. We recommend dialogue and diplomatic means as the only effective and constructive way to handle this issue." Responding to a query about Iranian threats to shut down the Strait of Hormuz in the event of an attack by the U.S., the FM noted that -- due to the increase in insurance fees that would inevitably result from an attack -- such a move would harm Kuwait and other GCC states more than it would hurt the U.S. The FM also suggested that if an attack by an "enemy country " (i.e. Israel) occurred, Kuwait and the other GCC countries would be the primary victims. Commenting on Kuwait's firm friendship for the U.S. stemming from the U.S. role in freeing Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's occupation, the FM stated, nevertheless, that Kuwait has been explicit with the U.S. in "openly declaring our position that we are against any military action to be launched from Kuwaiti soil against Iran." He reassured listeners, however, that he believed both sides in the dispute would continue to seek a solution through diplomatic action rather than resorting to war.

13. (U) In the same Al-Arabiya interview, the FM discussed his July 29-30 visit to Tehran (for a conference of foreign ministers from non-aligned countries), where he had expressed Kuwait's concerns to senior Iranian officials. FM Al Sabah said he had reiterated Kuwait's stance that Iran must show the world that its nuclear program is peaceful through a commitment to IAEA protocols. During an August 13 meeting with visiting U.S. Congresspersons (Bordallo, Turner, Hinojosa, Loeb sack - SEPTEL), the Foreign Minister reiterated

concerns earlier expressed to the media, noting the ramifications for Kuwait of a conflict between Iran and the U.S. or the possibility of an accidental leak from Iran's nuclear sites. The FM urged the U.S. to pursue a diplomatic solution and to maintain international solidarity to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions.

¶4. (U) In a widely reported August 10 meeting, Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al Sabah called upon Acting Premier and Minister of Defense Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al Sabah to develop a permanent contingency plan to protect the country at all times. Publicly expressed concerns have focused on the risks of an accidental nuclear spill, the possibility of deliberate Iranian rocket attacks on U.S. forces in Kuwait or on Kuwaiti facilities, the possible shut-down of the Strait of Hormuz, the emergence of Iranian-backed terrorist elements in Kuwait, and general destabilization in Iraq and in the wider region that could spill over into Kuwait. The press has reported that a number of GOK and other (often unnamed) sources have assured the public that emergency planning measures are already under way and include the stockpiling of food, potable water, and iodine pills (in the event of radiation) and the establishment of medical centers, among other measures. Unnamed GOK sources have also been reported to be contemplating a new military conscription law to enhance Kuwait's ability to respond to any emergency.

¶5. (C) During an August 11 introductory call by the newly-arrived POLCOUNS on Shaykh Thamer Al-Ali Al Sabah, Deputy Director of the National Security Bureau Shaykh Thamer emphasized his deep concern over Iran's hegemonic intentions in the region and the threat to Kuwait of being caught in a

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military exchange between Iran and the U.S. A U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran, he suggested, could bring about "Judgment Day" for Kuwait in the form of extensive Iranian missile attacks on Kuwaiti soil (similar to what Hizbollah visited on Israel in 2006), the emergence of Iranian-backed terrorist " sleeper cells" in Kuwait's Shia population, or attacks on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Shaykh Thamer told POLCOUNS that emergency planning measures have, in fact, been under way since 2003 and that Kuwait has made progress in preparing supplies of food, medicine, water and in setting up emergency clinics. These preparations, he said, were sparked not just by concerns over Iran, but also by Kuwait's proximity to nuclear-armed Israel, India and Pakistan. Shaykh Thamer stated that, on a separate track, the Amir tasked him about one year ago to examine the protection of Kuwait's energy infrastructure and that, three weeks ago, he was asked to head up a Committee on Critical Energy Infrastructure Protection comprised of representatives from five ministries. Shaykh Thamer noted that this had been the subject of a USG MOU arising from the Gulf Security Dialogue (GSD) and that the GOK would be ready to discuss the MOU "in about one month." Throughout, Shaykh Thamer echoed the FM's message that Kuwait favors a diplomatic solution to the Iran crisis, and deeply fears a military one.

Comment

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¶6. (C) FM Al Sabah's public comments provide a useful clarification on GOK thinking about current U.S.-Iranian tensions. We note that his comments on Iran and its quest for nuclear technology are essentially supportive of statements emanating from the December 2007 GCC 2 1 (GCC states plus Egypt and Jordan plus U.S.) in Doha and are consistent with what the Secretary asked the ministers to do at the Doha meeting. The minister's statement that Kuwait will not be used as a platform for a U.S. attack on Iran is a long-term GOK position and reflects a real fear of being caught in the middle of live fire. However, its primary purpose was to calm the public and to quiet fractious parliamentarians. In all probability, if push came to shove, we believe the GOK would do the needful in support of its

U.S. ally. While the GOK does, indeed, fear the prospect of an attack by Israel on Iranian nuclear sites, the FM's comments about "enemy" Israel were largely a throw-away line for domestic consumption.

17. (C) While there is probably less there than meets the eye, public and media focus on U.S. - Iran tensions have led to considerable discussion in the media, among parliamentarians and within the GOK about the need for emergency preparedness in the event that actual fighting breaks out between the U.S. and Iran or Israel and Iran. Despite the media focus on this issue, a great many Kuwaiti officials have not hesitated to depart Kuwait's hot season for their summer holidays, leaving many GOK offices short-staffed and belying the public rhetoric about the urgency of the situation. Embassy's conversations with GOK military counterparts reveal no signs of a heightened state of alert in Kuwait's military.

18. C) There is no doubt that the GOK and Kuwaitis in general, mindful of the country's tragic experiences over the past generation, are eager to keep Kuwait out of the bull's eye. In this regard, they strongly favor keeping up international diplomatic pressure on Iran to come into the IAEA fold and very much hope that the military option can be avoided. Despite the GOK's concern, we do not see or sense panic here and, while some emergency measures may be under way, Kuwaitis in this season are more interested in departing on vacation rather than heading for the bunkers. End Comment.

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